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SUBJECT: MALDIVIAN GOVERNMENT SEEKS US HELP IN STAVING OFF
EU RESOLUTION

REF: A. COLOMBO 1516
[B](#). COLOMBO 1337

Classified By: AMB. JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) On September 16 Mahamoud Shougee, Minister of Education for the Government of the Republic of Maldives (GORM), and Abdul Hameed Zakariyya, GORM Foreign Secretary, called on the Ambassador to request U.S. advice and assistance in staving off a resolution before the EU Parliament condemning the recent State of Emergency and subsequent detentions. Ambassador suggested that the Maldivians contact EU Chiefs of Mission in Colombo directly, but noted that ensuring due process for the detainees seemed the best way to deflate the proposed resolution. Shougee indicated that the State of Emergency (which allows detainees to be held without charge and denies them the right to counsel) would not be lifted immediately, but perhaps by the end of the month. He suggested that the GORM is developing evidence linking detainee Gasim Ibrahim, a member of the Special Majlis and prominent local businessman, to "Sheikh" Fareed, an anti-American Muslim extremist. He promised to share this information when the investigation was completed. The Maldivians invited DCM to visit the detainees during his upcoming visit (September 19-20). We find it hard to believe that pro-reform detainees--some of whom, including Gasim, are well and favorably known to us--would be involved with Fareed, whose goal of a rigid Islamic state is antithetical to the democratic reforms the detained MPs had been pressing for. End summary.

EU RESOLUTION

[1](#)2. (C) On September 16 Mahamoud Shougee, Minister of Education for the Government of the Republic of Maldives (GORM), and Abdul Hameed Zakariyya, GORM Foreign Secretary, called on the Ambassador to request U.S. advice and assistance in forestalling a proposed resolution before the EU Parliament condemning the State of Emergency and subsequent detentions. (Note: According to the Members of the European Parliament website, the proposed resolution was passed later the same day. The text of a letter from the Maldivian Foreign Minister to the Secretary on this subject, received via diplomatic note on September 17, is being conveyed septel. End note.) Shougee said that President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom had specifically asked him to seek "guidance and support" from the USG, which he regards as a friendly country, to stop the resolution, which the GORM fears would have grave consequences on the tourism industry. (Note: 70 percent of tourist arrivals to Maldives are from EU member countries. End note.)

[1](#)3. (C) Noting that the U.S. has limited influence in the EU Parliament, the Ambassador suggested the delegation visit EU Chiefs of Mission in Colombo. Shougee said he would be doing just that later in the day. The Ambassador observed that ensuring due process for the detainees is likely the most effective way to defuse such criticism from the EU. Protracted detentions of people without charge and without access to legal counsel feeds concern for the detainees' welfare and doubts about the GORM's objectives, he cautioned. In his visits to Maldives, the Ambassador said he had witnessed a deep-seated desire for political growth, especially among the youth. It is important that this desire for change is channeled positively; the GORM decision to establish the Special Majlis had seemed an attempt to do just that. The U.S. had been encouraged by signs that President Gayoom recognized the need for reform, the Ambassador said. If, however, the pressure for democratic change is stifled, it can end up being channeled in negative directions, he said.

A FOREIGN/FUNDAMENTALIST HAND?

14. (C) Shougee agreed that things had been moving in the right direction toward greater democratic change. President Gayoom is serious about reform, he asserted; he has even written a draft Constitution that allows for a multi-party system, the direct election of the President, and other reforms. Shougee said that he himself had been involved in behind-the-scenes efforts to get the reform process back on track after the controversy surrounding the election of the Speaker of the Special Majlis (Ref B). Things were going the right way, he reported, when the demonstrations of August 12-13 changed everything. While some observers contend that the demonstrations were spontaneous and others that they were planned, the fact remains that some of the protesters called for Gayoom's resignation, which, he stated, "could be read as an attempt to overthrow the government." The crowd degenerated into a mob, he continued, throwing stones and attempting to charge the police station. In the melee one policeman was stabbed. The authorities were forced to take stern measures in order to restore security, Shougee summarized, including the imposition of a State of Emergency and the detention of numerous suspects, some of whom participated in the demonstrations and some of whom did not. The State of Emergency will continue until the GORM completes its investigations to determine whether there was an organized attempt to bring down Gayoom's government and whether there was "a foreign hand" in the chaos, he said. These investigations might be completed and the State of Emergency lifted by the end of the month, he suggested.

15. (C) Also of concern to the GORM, said Shougee, is the apparent involvement of "Sheikh" Fareed, a radical anti-American/anti-Western extremist who faces previous charges for plotting to disrupt the tourism industry (by throwing acid on tourists) and for calling for a "jihad" to overthrow the government and set up an Islamic state. In particular, Fareed had been heard protesting the recent establishment of an American Corner in Maldives, Shougee reported. Fareed's followers had initiated the demonstrations and seemed to be inciting the crowd to violence, he charged. A ruling on Fareed's pending cases is expected soon; the GORM will not end the State of Emergency until the ruling is announced. In the meantime, the GORM is investigating whether any of the detainees has any link to Fareed, he concluded, suggesting that Gasim Ibrahim, a Special Majlis MP who has been detained since the demonstrations, may have been funding Fareed. "That will come out at the end of the day," he hinted, adding that the GORM will share any such evidence with the Embassy.

16. (C) While acknowledging the GORM's need to restore order after the demonstrations turned violent, the prolonged detention of pro-reform MPs without charge and without access to legal counsel is a "disturbing feature," the Ambassador replied. Some of the current detainees, like Gasim Ibrahim, are well known to the Embassy, he said, and while they are strong advocates for democratic change, they do not appear to have any interest in establishing an Islamic state. Gasim Ibrahim, a prominent businessman with lucrative investments in tourist resorts, seems a particularly unlikely supporter of a fundamentalist determined to destroy the tourist industry, the Ambassador suggested. The best way to handle the zeal for change is to move ahead toward legitimate reform, he reiterated. Calls for "jihad" find fertile ground when there seems to be no other outlet for change, he observed. By providing such an outlet, the GORM could be a wonderful example of a moderate Muslim state that develops into a democracy. The USG, as a friend of Maldives, wants to support that, he concluded.

DCM TO VISIT DETAINEES

17. (C) Noting that he plans to be in Maldives September 19-20 to open the U.S. Trade Fair, the DCM suggested that he might use the opportunity to visit some of the detainees, especially the daughter of Mohammad Latheef, a pro-reform activist in self-imposed "exile" in Sri Lanka. Shougee welcomed the suggestion, assuring the DCM he would be allowed access to any and all prisoners requested. The Ambassador said that he hoped to visit Maldives soon, perhaps in the first week of October, and to meet with President Gayoom at that time, as well as with the detainees, if they were still detained at that time. Shougee supported that idea.

EU PERSPECTIVE

18. (C) In a September 16 meeting with the Ambassador, Dutch Ambassador and current chair of the EU presidency Susanna Blankhart spoke about the EU Heads of Mission September 6 trip to Maldives (Ref A). Having only met with Maldivian Foreign Minister Fathulla Jameel and been denied a meeting with President Gayoom, Blankhart described the visit at being "met by a wall" by the GORM. That reaction led to the harsh press statement released by the EU following the trip. Blankhart explained that she tried to suggest to the FM that

the Maldivian government needed to be cautious about public opinion regarding the August 12-13 protest and subsequent events. Instead, the GORM issued a dismissive response to the EU's press statement, which Blankhart attributed as one of the causes of the strong September 16 resolution by the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), calling for Gayoom to repeal the state of emergency and release the pro-democracy reformers. Blankhart said that the EU's agenda will remain the release of the prisoners, the repeal of the state of emergency, and the reconvening of the Special Majlis.

19. (C) Regarding the issue of Islamic fundamentalism, Blankhart and the Ambassador agreed that it was a legitimate concern, but the Ambassador said he did not understand how that concern by the GORM could lead to the jailing of MPs. Blankhart agreed with Ambassador that such repressive behavior by the government could actually leave people with no option other than the fundamentalist approach.

COMMENT

110. (C) Managing change is difficult, especially if one has enjoyed, as President Gayoom has, unchallenged authority for 25 years. While Gayoom may recognize the need for pursue reform, he wants to do so at his own pace. The pent-up pressure for more immediate change, however, appears too great for him to harness. If Gayoom expects this desire for change to dissipate in the government clampdown--or our interest in the detainees' welfare to fade because of unsubstantiated allegations of an implausible link to Muslim extremism--he is miscalculating. DCM will pursue visits with pro-reform detainees during his upcoming stay in Maldives.
LUNSTEAD